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Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction

ISSN: 0011-1619 (Print) 1939-9138 (Online) Journal homepage: http://tandfonline.com/loi/vcrt20

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To cite this article: Peter Mathews (2018) Dynamic tensions in A. S. Byatt's "A Lamia in the Cévennes", Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, 59:2, 213-222, DOI: 10.1080/00111619.2017.1378609

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2017.1378609

CRITIQUE: STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION
2018, VOL. 59, NO. 2, 213–222
https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2017.1378609

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Dynamic tensions in A. S. Byatt's "A Lamia in the Cévennes"

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ABSTRACT

A. S. Byatt's short story "A Lamia in the Cévennes" is built on a principle of dynamic tension that operates across all her work, established in the initial part of this article by her critique of D. H. Lawrence's cosmological dichotomies, her subversion of gender and sexuality in *Possession*, the deconstruction of post-modern theory in *The Biographer's Tale*, and her retelling of the myth of Melusine. The second part of the article analyzes how these dynamic tensions influence the story in question, from Byatt's critique of Keats's romanticism, to her subversion of the line between myth and reality, her examination of realism and abstraction through references to David Hockney, and her reframing of these questions in terms of artistic and cultural assumptions about gender and sexuality. These examples demonstrate the critical mindset at work in Byatt's fiction, which confronts the complexities that necessarily co-exist in life and art.

KEYWORDS

A. S. Byatt; dynamic tensions; realism; mythology; lamia

A. S. Byatt's short story "A Lamia in the Cévennes," from her collection *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*, tells the story of an artist, Bernard Lycett-Kean, who retreats from the tumultuous world of Thatcherite London to the serene, natural beauty of the French Cévennes, only to find himself drawn into a different drama: an unexpected encounter with a lamia, a mythical hybrid of snake and woman who, although originally drawn from Greek mythology, has entered into modern consciousness through John Keats's romantic poem "Lamia" (1820). Byatt uses her story to examine the dynamic tension between a number of opposing values, from the dichotomy that Keats establishes between emotional art and "cold philosophy" to the boundaries separating reality and myth, the recurrent tension between realism and abstraction in modern art, and the problematic assumptions about gender that often appear in famous works of art and literature. In this story, Byatt is particularly interested in how the success of a revolutionary discourse can lead to the uncritical acceptance of one side in these cultural dichotomies: art over science, emotion over rationality, revolution over tradition, to name but a few examples. As a critical response, she offers the unheroic tale of Bernard, a character inspired in no small part by the British artist David Hockney, as the hyperbolic opposite of a romantic figure: emotionally cold, seemingly asexual, he is fascinated by beauty only in the most detached and abstract sense, making him the embodiment of Keats's "cold philosophy" even though he, too, is an artist.

The problem that any successful revolution faces arises from the way in which it is inevitably transformed by its position as the new establishment—how can it claim, as the incumbent order of things, still to be revolutionary? Is it possible for a discourse to maintain a genuinely critical dimension in these circumstances? These searching questions are central to understanding the fiction of A. S. Byatt, who throughout her career has written against the grain of her reader's expectations in a way that sees her both embrace and criticize all kinds of revolutionary discourses. Consider her position on feminism, for example. "Byatt," writes Richard Todd in *A. S. Byatt*, "like Iris Murdoch, is uneasy with feminism as a doctrine" (56). Jane Campbell's *A. S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* acknowledges this "ambivalent response to feminism" (4), but nonetheless argues, quite convincingly, that "her writing springs from an intuitive feminism based on experience, observation, and reading" (16). A facile opposition between "for"

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and "against" is constantly challenged in Byatt's writings, since she "rejects simple polarizations" (16) in order to investigate the deeper intricacies of the discourses she sets out to explore. This essay will investigate these complex dynamic tensions in Byatt's "A Lamia in the Cévennes," which repeatedly subverts conventional expectations in order to question assumptions about the meaning and value of artistic creativity.

Writing Against the Grain

In order to locate this analysis in the broader context of Byatt's writings, it is important first to understand how these critical principles function more broadly in her work. In a 1996 interview with *Salon* magazine, for example, Byatt expresses her reservations about the value of revolution:

> I read Michelet, who grew up in the revolution in Paris. He records how the streets of Paris stank of blood. There were places when he was a little boy where if you put your foot down, blood came up from under the stones. That is what comes out of revolutions and freedom. I lived through a time when the word "revolution" was just a good word to a whole generation. If it was a revolution, it was good. I don't think so. I think you proceed cautiously and you change things bit by bit. I don't like the automatic admiration of the word "subversive," either. Sometimes to be subversive is wonderful. Sometimes it's just destructive. ("A. S. Byatt")

The issue stems not from a matter of political disagreement, but from Byatt's view that the idea of revolution itself has been accorded a value that is too often accepted without critical scrutiny. "What I don't like," she says later in the same interview, "is people with very strong beliefs that cause them not to *look*" ("A. S. Byatt," emphasis in original). Matters of allegiance are always superseded, for Byatt, by the supreme importance of ensuring that one never accepts *anything* uncritically. It is from this overriding principle that, against the grain of the reader's expectations, she frequently ponders the shortcomings of her closest allies while sometimes finding unexpected virtues in her greatest enemies.

Nowhere is this principle more visible than in her ambivalence toward the impact of D. H. Lawrence on her work. While Byatt has dedicated considerable energy to advertising her most important positive influences—her essays on George Eliot and Robert Browning in *Passions of the Mind*, her two studies of Iris Murdoch, her book on Coleridge and Wordsworth, her admiration for Matisse in *The Matisse Stories*, her recent interest in William Morris in *Peacock and Vine*—she has also repeatedly acknowledged the importance of Lawrence, "whom I cannot escape and cannot love" (*Shadow* xi). These last words come from the 1991 preface she wrote for the Vintage reissue of her first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun*, in which the central character of Henry Severell is both a critique of and an homage to Lawrence. Critics such as Jack Stewart and Peter Preston have, in recent years, published articles tracing the specific connections between Lawrence and Byatt, from Byatt's parody of scenes from *Women in Love* in *The Virgin in the Garden* to the parallel between the banned book trial in *Babel Tower* and the censoring of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. *The Children's Book* also features a Lawrentian character in Herbert Methley, a "sun-worshipping" (175) novelist and seducer of women who gives Olive Wellwood, the book's protagonist, a copy of his novel *Daughters of Men*, which closely resembles an amalgam of *Sons and Lovers* with the story of how Lawrence met his wife Frieda.

Byatt has written extensively about her reaction to Lawrence's ideas, initially mediated as it was by F. R. Leavis's depiction of Lawrence, in *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist*, as the exemplary inheritor of the Great Tradition of the British novel. Byatt recalls her resistance to Lawrence's "preaching," to his "attempts to cast me as a 'Lawrentian woman,'" but nonetheless describes his "art" in novels such as *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, along with the "ferocious precision of the poems," as "exhilarating" ("One"). Byatt understands perfectly why Lawrence, after his sanctification by Leavis, was made a prime target by feminist critics, most famously in Kate Millet's negative assessment of his work in *Sexual Politics*, which undertakes the kind of didactic reading that Byatt explicitly eschews. Such ideological interpretations, she argues, ultimately took the "literary-critical pieties about subversiveness and authenticity of the Sixties" and "formalised them into a manageable belief system which had its own thought police" ("One"). Byatt takes particular issue with Lawrence's antagonism between sun and moon, a symbolic cosmology he

develops that is grounded in problematic assumptions about gender and sexuality. In this passage from *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, Lawrence explains the meaning behind these central metaphors:

> [T]he sun is the great sympathetic center of our inanimate universe[,] […] the great fiery, vivifying pole[.] […] [T]he moon is the other pole, cold and keen and vivifying, corresponding in some way to a *voluntary* pole. We live between the polarized circuit of sun and moon. And the moon is polarized by the lumbar ganglion, primarily, in [hu]man[ity]. Sun and moon are dynamically polarized to our actual tissue, they affect this tissue all the time. (153, emphasis in original)

The symbolic antagonism described here represents, for Lawrence, the inherent cosmological tension between intellect and instinct, mind and body, and, most problematically, male and female that he believes characterizes all of life.

In her new preface to *The Shadow of the Sun*, Byatt expresses particular distaste for the "blind wholesome passivity" (*Shadow* xiii) to which Lawrence reduces the protagonist of his tale "*Sun*." "There is something powerfully repellent," writes Byatt, "about Lawrence's sexual imagery for what the sun is doing to the woman" in that short story (xiii). Subverting Lawrence's cosmological structure by adapting it to her own purposes, Byatt asserts: "What I write is heliotropic. […] [T]here is nothing intrinsically male about the sun, or female about the earth" (xiii). While Byatt admires the artistry of Lawrence's symbolism, she rejects the sexual and gender positions it implies. "Compelled by Lawrence's use of language and symbol, and by the scope of his ontological vision," writes Stewart, "Byatt conducts a dialectic in her novels between his ideology and diametrically opposing ideas" (50). In contrast to the tendency, after Millet, to disdain Lawrence altogether due to his ideological flaws, Byatt seeks instead to illuminate what is valuable and creative in his work while maintaining a critical resistance to those elements she finds problematic or repugnant.

A further example of this dialectical complexity occurs in her most famous novel, *Possession*. In a 2006 interview in *Contemporary Literature*, Byatt talks about how she borrowed from feminist ideas to create the Victorian character of Christabel Lamotte, then proceeded to undermine expectations about what such a feminist character should be like. "In *Possession*, I […] gleefully […] wrote against the grain of what a feminist would have told," she reveals. "I made a feminist heroine, who since I'd invented her could be whatever I liked. So I made her a lesbian poet who turned out to have had a heterosexual affair. I deliberately shifted the paradigm" (Walker 332). The brilliant, revolutionary work of feminist critics in exploring the lacunae of gender and sexuality in the Victorian age, in classic works such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*, can, by their success, be said to have produced a new kind of convention. So it is that Byatt disrupts, in turn, even this revolutionary discourse by choosing to return to the seemingly conventional (in the form of Christabel's heterosexual affair with Ash), a move that is typical of her restlessly subversive strategy.

By a process of critical return, Byatt engages in a self-reflexive appraisal of the limitations of conventional revolutionary discourse. For her, true subversion must always look forward *and* backward, challenging the reactionary values of the past while understanding that what came before often contains a concealed wisdom and richness that is worth preserving. The reader again sees this dialectic principle at work in *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), in which the protagonist, Phineas G. Nanson, rejects the prevailing trends of postmodern criticism because he discovers an unexpected intellectual vitality in the seemingly outdated mode of biographical criticism. Yet "*The Biographer's Tale* paradoxically presents Byatt's most explicit critique of postmodernism," observes Campbell, "within a structure that is itself heavily postmodernist" (5). Byatt's texts thus resist becoming didactic by writing against even their own assumptions, constantly weighing the value of their underlying ideas so that nothing is ever left unexamined.

A final preliminary example of this process in Byatt's work, before we turn to "A Lamia in the Cévennes," is her use of the myth of Melusine. Melusine is a fairy from medieval folklore, a water spirit who, like a mermaid, is represented as a human woman above the waist and a snake or fish below. Byatt refers to Melusine in many of her writings, but the story's most important appearance occurs in

Possession, where Melusine is the subject of a poem by Christabel Lamotte. The Melusine figure fascinates Byatt because, as she recounts in *On Histories and Stories*, "*Melusina* was written because I had heard a talk by the French feminist, Luce Iragaray, on powerful women who were neither virgins or mothers" (47). Gillian M. E. Alban, in her book *Melusine the Serpent Goddess in A. S. Byatt's* Possession *and in Mythology*, explains the centrality of this myth to Byatt's fiction: "She is […] clearly fascinated by the theme of metamorphosis which recurs in Melusine's story, and returns to the metaphor of the snake, caterpillar, or worm which takes wing or becomes a butterfly, in *Angels and Insects*, 'Lamia in the Cévennes' in *Elementals*, and even as early as *The Game*" (16). While Byatt uses the critical symbolism of Melusine as a liminal figure, neither human nor snake, neither virgin nor mother, that does not stop her from also satirizing the myth. Julian Gitzen notes in "A. S. Byatt's Self-Mirroring Art," for example, that the scene in *Possession* where Maud startles Roland peering through the bathroom keyhole "re-enact[s] in comic fashion the fairy's betrayal by her husband" (92). "A Lamia in the Cévennes" brings together many of these same elements—not just the general principle of dialectical critique outlined here, but the questioning of revolution (both aesthetic and political), the Lawrentian dynamic tension between sun (fire) and moon (ice), and the reappearance of the Melusine story, intermingled in this case with Keats's own appropriation of the mythical Lamia.

Dynamic Tensions in "A Lamia in the Cévennes"

The main symbolic dialectic at work in "A Lamia in the Cévennes" is between fire and ice, heat and cold—a metaphor it shares in common with the rest of the stories in *Elementals*. Byatt's use of this symbolism recycles many of the common meanings that these symbols have in both their romantic and Lawrentian contexts, a significance that is singled out by the story's key quotation from Keats's "Lamia" (1818):

> Do not all charms fly?
> At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
> There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
> We know her woof, her texture; she is given
> In the dull catalogue of common things.
> Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
> Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
> Empty the haunted air and gnomed mine—
> Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
> The tender-personed Lamia melt into a shade. (Byatt, "*Elementals*" 109)

Keats here makes the conventional romantic association between coldness and philosophy, with "philosophy" understood in the broad sense of intellectual, rational thought. Keats's depiction of "cold philosophy" is relentlessly negative, depicting as it does, in the latter lines of this quotation, how the intellect destroys beauty, disperses rainbows, clips the wings of angels, turns Lamia into a ghost, and generally purges the world of its beauty in order to reduce it to a "dull catalogue of common things" (109). The implication of Keat's symbolism is that passion, with its symbolic heat, is the source from which true beauty springs, reflecting the romantic idea that art springs not from the intellect but from the emotions.

These negative associations of coldness with the intellect are something that Byatt repeatedly seeks to challenge in her fiction. In *Possession*, for instance, Maud Bailey's towering intellect is connected to her chilly beauty. "She thicks men's blood with cold," is how Fergus Wolfe describes her, adapting a line from Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) (*Possession* 39). Maud (who, as mentioned earlier with regard to the bathroom scene, is often compared to Melusine) is another of Byatt's subversively constructed female characters, for whom the chill of the intellect is her natural environment. It is as though, Roland observes, "the cold brought out her proper life, as though she were at home in it" (143). Byatt employs a congruent symbolism in "Cold," the story that immediately follows "A Lamia in the Cévennes," a fairy tale in which the princess Fiammarosa, like

Maud, feels most at home in frigid surroundings. "Out there, in the cold," she tells Hugh, her tutor, "I am a living being" (*Elementals* 132). The cold provides the energy from which she derives her art.

> She studied snow-crystals and ice formations under a magnifying glass, in the winter, and studied the forms of her wintry flowers and mosses in the summer. She became an artist[.] […] Now she began to weave tapestries, […] which mixed the geometric forms of the snow-crystals with the delicate forms of the moss and rosettes of petals, and produced simmering, intricate tapestries that were […] unlike anything seen before in that land. […] She was happy, and in the winter, when the world froze again under an iron-grey sky, she was ecstatic. (135)

The exigencies of the genre mean that Fiammarosa is forced to choose between romance and her art, between heat and cold. Her husband, Sasan, wins her heart by presenting her with objects of glass, which superficially look like they are made of ice (a resemblance that Byatt also discusses in her essay "Ice, Snow, Glass"), and it is only later that she realizes glass requires fire to come into existence. The passion between Fiammarosa and Sasan becomes a dance of compromise, intertwining the incompatible opposites of heat and cold so that, as Jessica Tiffin points out in *Marvelous Geometry*, what ultimately "saves this apparently doomed union is, in fact, art. If glass and ice are akin in texture despite their very opposed origins in heat and cold, they are also alike in that Byatt associates both mediums throughout with artistry, creativity, and artifact" (119). For the sake of love, Fiammarosa is forced to compromise her artistic expression, "for no one has everything she can desire" (Byatt, "*Elementals*" 182).

"A Lamia in the Cévennes," despite using many of the same metaphors, ends very differently from "Cold," a variance that seems to be attributable, argues Campbell, to the different genders of their protagonists. Unlike Fiammarosa, "Bernard […] is free to choose art over the possibility of love" (Campbell 205). There is a certain sense, nonetheless, in which both characters are attempting to deal with a similar set of expectations, albeit from different ends of the spectrum. Whereas Fiammarosa's story begins in the mythical world of the fairy tale, in which she must reconcile her idealized life as a princess to the imperfections of reality, Bernard's reality is threatened by "myth entering the real world" (Boccardi 110) in the form of the Lamia, who tries unsuccessfully to lure him with clichés of illusory fulfillment that smacks of "Faustian damnation" (100). This dynamic tension between myth and reality that punctuates "A Lamia in the Cévennes," in the tradition of Angela Carter's subversive fairy tales, repeatedly goes against the reader's expectations. "Byatt s'éloigne progressivement du cadre réaliste initial et nous offre à travers ce combat herculéen une fable fantaiste qui culmine dans la réécriture, entre autres, du ≪Lamia≫ de Keats [Byatt moves progressively away from the story's initial realistic framework and offers us, via this Herculean struggle, a fantastic fable that culminates in the rewriting, among other things, of Keats's 'Lamia']," argues Pascale Tollance (14, my translation). Byatt particularly references myths of seduction in which women are portrayed negatively as destructive forces, and who thus, through the passion they arouse, drag down the men that desire them. Preceding the text of "A Lamia in the Cévennes," for example, is a reproduction of Henri Matisse's *Sirène*, a reference to the Greek myth of the semi-divine women who used their beautiful songs to lure sailors to their deaths (although Matisse's serene, mermaid-like creature seems hardly capable of such malevolence). There are also the story's references to the Genesis story through its snake symbolism, a biblical myth that in Milton's retelling in *Paradise Lost* predominantly lays the blame for humanity's fall on Eve; the allusions to Goethe's *Faust*, in which Faust is seduced not only by Mephistophilis's promise of knowledge but also by his lust for Gretchen; and Byatt's intertwining of the story of the Lamia with that of Melusine, especially through her use of names such as Melanie (Byatt's modification of "Melusine") and Raymond (Raimondin is Melusine's husband in the original myth). Bernard is the very opposite of these mythical characters, a man who, by staunchly resisting the illusions of romantic passion, goes against all expectations for how this kind of protagonist ought to behave. Such stories are supposed to reveal the universally flawed nature of humanity, the tragic passion leading to sin that permeates the myths of Adam and Eve, Faust and Gretchen, Lucius and Lamia—yet Bernard staunchly refuses to play the part for which he is cast.

Despite her own lack of religious faith, Byatt is nonetheless repeatedly drawn to the mythical world of fairy tales in her work. "There are all sorts of anthropological and ethnological and aesthetic reasons why I write" fairy tales, explains Byatt in one interview, "But really I write them because that's how I started telling the world to myself" (Walker 341). Byatt uses this dynamic tension between reality and fiction to advantage in her work, weaving old myths into the fabric of the realistic worlds she creates, taking readers back into the past while at the same time challenging and questioning the meaning and assumptions of these stories in the most modern critical way imaginable. Although Byatt uses myth as a disruptive force that intrudes on the otherwise realistic world of "A Lamia in the Cévennes," her use of the fairy tale represents an act of inversion at another level. In an essay comparing classic fairy tales to how they have been reworked by contemporary writers, Joyce Carol Oates reminds her readers that fairy tales have traditionally been used to reinforce the conservative status quo, that it is only recently that such tales have had a more revolutionary function. Oates points to Cinderella as the perfect example of a story misunderstood by a modern, bourgeois audience, which tends to see this tale as a parable of social mobility in which a commoner rises to the position of princess. "Contrary to popular assumption," argues Oates, "Cinderella […] is not a commoner but a girl of aristocratic birth whose misfortune has been to lose her mother," so that her success at the end of the story is not an elevation but a restoration of the "natural" aristocratic order of things (100). Oates continues:

> In a crucial sense fairy tales work to subvert romantic wishes, for they repeatedly confirm "order" and redress dislocations of privileged birth while leaving wholly unchallenged the hierarchical basis for such privileging. […] "Progress" in the social-evolutionary sense would be anathema to the fairy-tale atmosphere of fateful resignation and what might be defined as a causeless consequence: your fate is deserved because it happens to you; it does happen to you because it's deserved. All "good" heroines accept their fate passively, unquestioningly. To express even normal distress at being viciously mistreated would be in violation of the narrow strictures of fairy-tale "goodness." (100)

Oates makes a strong case that the fairy tale has undergone an important revolution by examining retellings of these tales in contemporary literature, starting with Anne Sexton's *Transformations* and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, which paved the way for more recent examples such as Margaret Atwood's *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983) and *The Robber Bride* and, of course, the work of A. S. Byatt (with Oates singling out "The Story of the Eldest Princess" from *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*). Byatt's use of the fairy tale in "A Lamia in the Cévennes" again subverts even this latest tendency by means of Bernard's complete lack of interest in the seductive dramas of conventional fairy tales. His indifference to the lamia's charms effectively asks us to imagine a tale of temptation where seduction, against all expectations, fails to take place: an Adam and Eve who are not tempted by the snake, a Faust who is indifferent to the offers of Mephistophilis, and a Lucius/Raimondin who is immune to the enticements of Lamia/Melusine. "I don't flirt," Bernard tells his friend Raymond, "I paint" (106). Bernard's refusal to be seduced, along with his resolute insistence on acknowledging only a reality that he can verify with his own senses, makes him a forcefully anti-romantic figure, a character caught up in a bizarre fairy-tale who nonetheless uncompromisingly refuses to play by its rules or expectations.

This recurrent idea of art as grounded in a myth of heterosexual seduction turns out, when viewed through the critical lens of Byatt's story, to be informed by a problematic notion of women who, as affective sources of inspiration, are allowed to function as muses but can never themselves aspire either to creativity or the life of the mind. Bernard, by contrast, is interested mainly in the abstract aspects of the world around him, his art dissolving every particular into a question of color: the glittering blues of the Lamia's tail are as enticing to him as a formal problem as the fascinating blues of David Hockney's homoerotic pool paintings that initially capture his imagination upon his move to France. Indeed, there is a strong case to made that Byatt uses Hockney's life and art as a prototype for the character of Bernard, a precursor that anticipates Byatt's questioning of the tradition of the female muse through Hockney's frequent use of his male lovers as his models.

Just like in Byatt's story, Hockney's work also stems from a dynamic tension that is driven by the unresolved opposition between realism and abstraction in modern art, with his most influential

pieces playing subversively with the intersection of these two techniques. Hockney's painting *Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices* (1965), for example, places a somewhat realistic sketch of his father Kenneth at its center, while around this figure he arranges a number of oddly arranged shapes and colors. This painting is often read as a parody of Cézanne's famous injunction to "treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone," a principle that Hockney mocks by the arbitrary positioning of the surrounding "artistic devices" (Cézanne in Chipp 19). In the 1980s, Hockney further played with realism and abstraction through the use of photomontages or "joiners," a rethinking of cubism in which he would assemble a single picture from a series of photographs to create an effect that was simultaneously representative and impressionistic.

One of the most important moments in Hockney's artistic journey, however, and the one that has the most bearing on Byatt's story, is a work from 1972 titled *Portrait of the Artist (Pool with Two Figures)*. This canvas is the culmination of two projects that Hockney was working on at the time. The first consists of his celebrated pool paintings, a subject inspired by his visit and subsequent relocation to California in the 1960s. The pool paintings are representative pieces, but Hockney subverts their superficial realism by playing with geometry, movement, and light so that the water in works such as *Peter Getting out of Nick's Pool* (1966) and *A Bigger Splash* (1967) is transformed into a formal abstraction. The other project in question is a series of double portraits, painted in a largely realistic style, in which Hockney uses the geometry of the picture to suggest a lack of connection between the two figures being portrayed, such as the vertical lines that separate the husband and wife in *American Collectors (Fred and Marcia Weisman)* (1968). The story behind the inspiration for *Portrait of the Artist* is that Hockney, while visiting the filmmaker Tony Richardson in the south of France, accidentally juxtaposed a photograph of a swimmer in a Californian pool with a picture of Peter Schlesinger, Hockney's lover from 1966 to 1971. After an initial abandoned attempt, new photographs were taken by Richardson's pool, and Hockney combined the essentials of his two major projects onto one canvas: the abstraction of the pool pictures on the left, the realism of the double portraits on the right, divided by the familiar motif of the vertical line, and featuring the landscape of southern France in the background.

Just as Hockney unifies these disparate elements into a single space brimming with dynamic tension, so, too, Byatt's adaptation of Hockney's life and work playfully skirts the line between biography and fiction to borrow what connects with her story's themes, from Hockney's exploration of the artistic conflict between realism and abstraction to his subversion of gender expectations. Bernard is perhaps more extreme in his push toward abstraction than Hockney, going so far past realism that his artistic ambition moves outside the realm of representation. This habit of extreme abstraction allows Bernard to see the models for his art from beyond the usual limits not only of gender, but even of humanity, as evidenced by the way his attention turns indiscriminately from the departed Lamia's tail, at the story's end, to working out the colors of a butterfly. As Ian J. MacRae writes:

> For Byatt, "Lamia" is a well-crafted, rigorous, formally constrained performance. The story can be productively read as a parable of creation, in which the butterfly's "kaleidoscopic qualities" serves as an artistic model, the basis for a productive, even ecstatic formal strategy (a means of composition: a methodology, a structure with a demonstrable mechanics; and a style with functional—cognitive and imaginary—significations). (26)

This detached, anti-romantic mode of art also bears a noticeable resemblance to the work of Honoré de Balzac, who, like Lawrence, is another influence that is easy to overlook in Byatt's work, but whose pervasiveness ranges from the character of Seraphita Fludd in *The Children's Book* (her name is an allusion to Balzac's mystical 1834 novel *Seraphita*) to Randolph Henry Ash's meditations on his work in *Possession*. Balzac's novels and stories are famous for their downbeat, realistic endings—the disillusionment of Sarrasine when he discovers the truth about Zambinella in *Sarrasine*, the abandonment of Goriot by his daughters in *Old Goriot*, or the suicide of Lucien de Rubempré in *A Harlot High and Low*. Yet as Ash observes in *Possession*, "Balzac's cynicism was always nevertheless romantic—such greed, such gusto. 'Le dégoût, c'est voir juste. Après la possession, l'amour voit juste chez les hommes' ['Disgust allows us to see things as they really are. After possession, love allows us to see human beings as they

really are']" (306, my translation). Romanticism and realism, emotion and detachment, intricate detail and formal abstraction: Byatt repeatedly forces each side of these dichotomies into a dynamic tension whereby each term helps to define the limits of the other.

Throughout "A Lamia in the Cévennes," Byatt similarly creates a number of counterintuitive juxtapositions that challenge the reader's expectations. In the character of Bernard, for instance, she presents the reader with a male artist as her central figure, but she does so to disrupt the gendered cultural tradition, from Milton to Keats to Lawrence, that casts women as passive sources of inspiration and men as active creators. Bernard's detached mode of making art, his tendency toward abstraction, allows him to transcend this tradition of gendered appropriation by displacing the usual dynamics of heterosexual desire into his art. Byatt writes: "He had been at least as interested in the problems of reflection and refraction when he had had the lovely snake in his pool as he had been in its oddity—in its *otherness*[.] […] He didn't want a woman. He wanted another visual idea" (110). As such, she presents the rationalism of Keats's "cold philosophy" as an unexpected virtue in the creation of Bernard's art. In a 2003 interview with Jonathan Noakes, Byatt speaks about the dangers of analyzing too much, of "murdering to dissect" (26)—another romantic reference, this time to Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned" from *Lyrical Ballads*. Yet Bernard's emotional detachment is precisely what allows him to see the intricate (if abstracted) details of the world around him, unlocking a beauty that the emotional approach of the romantic might easily overlook. This detachment—this *coldness*, in the recurrent symbolism of the stories in *Elementals*—has its dangers, but Byatt's story reveals that it has the hidden virtue not just of seeing things more clearly, but also of preserving their "otherness" in a way that does not colonize or appropriate. The reader observes this behavior not only in Bernard's approach to the Lamia/snake, but again in the way he looks at the butterfly at the story's end: "Exact study would not clip this creature's wings, it would dazzle his eyes with its brightness" (111). Byatt cleverly uses the concerns of the romantics against themselves, showing throughout the story how the connection between art and emotion is often made within a framework that is infused with anti-intellectualism and problematic assumptions about gender.

"A Lamia in the Cévennes" thus seems, at first, to make some startlingly unusual affirmations—masculinity over femininity, rationality over emotion, reality over myth, order over revolution—but Byatt makes these choices, in every case, in a critically subversive way. "It is clear to anyone that has read anything by Byatt," observes María Jesús Martínez Alfaro, "that her mind is naturally inclusive" (Alfaro). If we take this principle seriously, we quickly realize how facile it is to think of this story in terms of the masculine "triumphing" over the feminine, of reality "disproving" the mythical elements that intrude into Bernard's world, or any other hierarchically structured oppositions. The key to the text lies in the hybrid form of the Lamia herself, "a prime example of deconstructing the dichotomy of culture and nature through mytho-poeic revision" (Coelsch-Foisner), a threshold creature whose indeterminate nature historically has been the source of so much cultural anxiety. Byatt further affirms this idea of hybridity through her allusion to Mary Douglas's book *Purity and Danger*: "Mary Douglas, the anthropologist, says that *mixed* things, neither flesh nor fowl, so to speak, always excite repulsion and prohibition" (101–02, original italics). It is precisely in this synthetic zone of the threshold that Byatt repeatedly sets out to explore in her writing a conceptual space that accepts the importance of dichotomies and the creativity of the dynamic tensions they generate. "A Lamia in the Cévennes" ultimately uses this principle not to reject the influence of revolutionary discourses such as romanticism or modernism, but to enter into a critical dialogue with their assumptions, highlighting their problems and prejudices while at the same time acknowledging, in the same gesture, the crucial place of these revolutionary movements in the order of creative inspiration.

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